

Reflections from the Teaching and Learning Section Editors

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Abstract: This serves as the introduction to the Special Issue on Teaching and Learning of Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping.

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As the co-editors for the Teaching and Learning section, we were excited to be asked to write our first introduction for a Reflections issue. As we discussed the articles in this issue, we realized that we had our own stories to tell that reflect the content of the narratives included here. So, we decided to introduce ourselves to you, the reader, and share our short reflection about our journey into social work education and the synergy of teaching and learning.

Carol: I was never one of those children who lined up dolls and teddy bears to play school. I preferred to draw. My Big Chief tablet was always with me and acted as my sketch pad. I will admit to being a bit of a daydreamer. Marie Curie was an influence on me, and I decided during high school, after taking a career inventory, that I would be a doctor. My family was poor. I did not realize it at the time. When I investigated college, my heart stopped. How could I possibly afford to attend? A family friend gave me \$500 to attend, and by default, I chose the closest college – a “teacher’s college.” My general education coursework was chosen with the idea that I would escape and go to medical school. My parents and peers discouraged that; they convinced me that I should be a nurse because female doctors would never get a job. My parents went a step further and suggested that I should just stay in the college I was attending because if I became a teacher, I would have summers and holidays to be with my future children. Without family support of any kind, and trying to pay my way by myself, I decided that perhaps they were correct. I did enjoy the coursework I was taking. So, I declared education with concentrations in English and physical education as my major. I had no clue how much I would love teaching. During my “student teaching” experience, my supervising teacher allowed me to experiment using my ideas for teaching. I preferred experiential education, and quite honestly, I had no coursework in the area. I just knew that students needed more than a text in

order to be drawn into the material and help it to “stick.” Teaching was in my blood to stay. While I was teaching, though, I was bringing extra oranges and PBJ sandwiches for those kids who hadn’t eaten. I began coat drives for those students K-12 who had insufficient winter attire. I started a food pantry for emergency needs. I was doing social work. After my husband died, leaving me with three young children, I realized I needed to do something to raise my income and increase our economic security. I asked about careers in demand, and social work was at the top of the list.

Remember that career inventory I took? The top career in my results was social work. I earned my MSW and practiced school social work, among other things. Once more, I realized that the process of teaching and learning, including the value of experiential, holistic learning, was in my wheelhouse. So, after a number of years or practice, I was approached about teaching a single class at a local college. That single assignment turned into three courses the next semester and a full time job the next academic year. The rest is history, as they say. I am a social worker who teaches. I am a teacher who does social work. The boundaries between the roles are quite clear for me, but the transferable skills and knowledge continue to amaze me, and I have been doing this for more than 30 years. The discoveries that the authors in this special section share with us readers are profound, salient, and lasting. Thank you, authors, for recognizing and sharing the insights you have gained on your own journey to becoming who you are.

Arlene: My introduction to social work was different than most other social workers. My story must be disappointing to students, but it is my story. I was a newly single parent, returning to school for my Bachelor’s degree in Sociology. As a single parent, I had very little income and therefore qualified for a bit of financial aid. One financial aid program I qualified for was work-study. At that university, there were a

variety of work-study positions that could be attained, either on-campus or off-campus. I was a bit late in being awarded a work-study grant, so by the time I went to the financial aid office to see about a position, the only options were off-campus. I selected two community agencies who were looking for work-study. The first was a numismatic museum. This meant I would be working with coins, paper money, and medals. I always enjoyed learning about coins, so I thought this would be a good fit. The other position was at a local youth shelter. I thought it would be a good idea to try to make a difference in the lives of youth. After all, “they are our future,” I thought. My problem at this stage in my life was that I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do as a career, I just knew I had to have one. I put in applications to both agencies, and the youth agency called me almost immediately to set up an interview. I was hired after the interview, and this became my introduction to the world of social work.

While I did not have a burning passion to work with people when I started working at the youth shelter, I developed this passion. My discovery of the youth’s home experiences was a culture shock for me. I had lived a pretty sheltered life and had no idea people were not loving and kind to their children. This ignited a passion in me to be a person that could offer this unconditional positive regard to youth and help them transition to their next stage in life. I was a very strong youth advocate. Upon my graduation, I was hired full-time at the agency.

Over time, I moved into a foster care position with the agency. This is when I discovered that parents and foster parents also needed this unconditional positive regard and advocacy. I learned I must be a family advocate, and that everyone had a story to tell. By that time, I discovered that there was an actual degree called Social Work, and that it was possible for me to get a Master’s degree. My enrollment into the MSW program opened my eyes to the intersectionality of diversity, and the person-in-environment concept. I hadn’t been taught this in my undergraduate studies. I had to work twice as hard as the BSW students in my program, as they already knew concepts and it was assumed I did, too. I spent a lot of time looking up information and learning about the planned change process, treatment planning, systems theory, and other concepts unique to social work. With each new

discovery I found myself more fascinated and passionate about social work as a career.

One of my passions in the field was cultural diversity. As a person of color, a woman, a single parent, and a person with a disability, I realized that society was not set up in a way that was affirming to people like me or my clients. As a result, I jumped at the opportunity to become a diversity instructor and trainer.

After I received my MSW, I had an opportunity to become a field supervisor for BSW level students. I approached this job with the same passion as I had with clients. I decided students would only engage in filing if it was an actual learning process, and did everything I could to protect the learning environment for the students. My experience in the MSW program made me sensitive to the learning needs of students. At the same time, as a supervisor, I was learning that I was not responsible for solving the problems my supervisees brought to me, and sometimes all they really wanted to do was vent about an issue. I realized supervision had similarities to client work in that I should allow the worker self-determination within agency policy. Due to my work as a field supervisor, I began to be invited to speak to students in the classroom, and discovered I really enjoyed teaching. This led to adjunct teaching in the BSW program. I had worked as a trainer in different capacities, but teaching was much different. Training was time-limited and usually covered a single topic in detail, while teaching was broader but the timeframe allowed detailed learning about several specific skills or concepts. Teaching also allowed me to get to know “participants” (students) better, and to develop a learning relationship with them. Teaching also re-invigorated me and improved my supervision and intervention skills by reminding me about social work skills and concepts.

Eventually, I was able to obtain a full-time teaching position. It was here that I discovered a whole different problem: staying up-to-date on innovations in the field! I resolved to always have a hand in field work, either through contract work or volunteering. In this way, my activities outside of the classroom could inform my teaching, and my teaching could inform the way I approached practice. This synergy of teaching and practice has allowed me to continue to make a difference in my community, while educating others to make a difference, as well.

My initial “falling into” social work opened up a whole new world for me, one that helped me make a difference in my community, that helped me be a better parent, and taught me to navigate systems in order to advocate for others. It helped me understand the experiences of other people and the roadblocks they encounter in order to self-actualize, and that sometimes people don’t treat each other very well. The people who don’t treat others well are very often the product of their own experiences and environment, and in a way this reaffirmed my belief that people would be “good” each other if they could be. Far from discouraging me, this information brought me full-circle to my initial beliefs that humans are complicated, but generally want to do “good” in the world.

When we shared our personal journey into teaching social work, we discovered that there is a convergence in our stories that reflects what the authors in this section have revealed. We see the connection between our choice of career and the disciplines within which we were educated. That connection is the observation that we each had experiences that led us to the discovery of social work as a profession, and further, to teaching as an expression of our passions. We both value not just education but the immersion of ourselves in the process of continued growth, sharing journeys with our students.

The topic of self-discovery is a focus for Trevor Gates in his article, “Coming of Age as an LGBTQ Social Work Educator: Reflections on a Personal and Professional Journey.” Trevor Gates explores the issue of personal and professional identity, as well as the developmental process over time. He describes his personal identity as a gay man, its relationship to teaching diversity, and the 40 challenges of responding to student’s personal values around the issue of sexual orientation identity. The issue is complicated by the fact that most social work students made the decision to enter social work based on their personal values (Hughes, 2011; Osteen, 2011) yet those same values may result in difficulty engaging in affirmative practice with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, polygamous/polyamorous, and kink (LGBTQIAPK) populations. Trevor describes his experience with a student who had difficulty with affirmative practice, reflects on his knowledge then,

compares it to his current professional development, and considers how he might handle the same situation now. Embedded in this narrative is the consideration of context of practice and the manifestation of the social work educator’s personal and professional development with the classroom environment and the students’ own personal and professional development.

Social workers are not immune to the challenges of everyday life. While social work educators are often viewed by students as having all the answers and experience, we are nonetheless still human. In “Grief and Loss: Reflections Along the Journey to Healing,” Kenya Yonawa McKinley describes her experience with the loss of her sister, and her challenge to remain professional, yet human, to her students. McKinley’s discussion of the stages of grief and her experiences as she moved through them reminds us to be cognizant of each other’s experiences and that grief can be an opportunity for growth and learning.

This trend of metamorphosis and context of practice is continued in Stephanie Lyu Rhee’s article, “A Caterpillar Morphs into a Butterfly.” Rhee describes teaching as helping students cast off their cocoons, to morph into the butterfly as social workers. Her experience in her first semester of teaching led to the realization that social work educators are often in their own cocoons, and that paying attention to the context of the classroom can help educators morph into their own butterflies with respect to educating undergraduate social workers.

A title such as, “Sticky Bombs!” is certainly intriguing, to say the least. What on earth could this narrative contain? Author Casey O’Meara deftly weaves the story of a father-daughter walk that engages the whole person and develops a strong case for the value of experiential education. His daughter gives him a lesson about remembering how to learn while also surprising him with new awareness of her own classroom experience. Ultimately, O’Meara explains that learning occurs naturally and is purposeful. Our goal as educators is to find those moments where both of these criteria can be manifested for the students in our classes. A father-daughter walk ignites a passion for extending learning beyond the classroom in productive and insightful ways. As for what “sticky bombs” are, you will have to read the article to find the answer.

To be in a classroom and get to know our students is a goal for most, if not all, of us who are teachers. Giving and receiving assignments is part of the plan. Thinking that she knew a student, author Amy Fisher had an experience that provided her with the type of information that deepened her knowledge of one particular student, as well as helped her to realize she is both modeling social work behavior and educator behavior for her students. Providing feedback on two occasions to a student who seemed to be very well prepared and who interacted in significant ways in discussions, Amy was disturbed to see that her comments for changes on a paper in order to improve the next grade were not being heeded. She learned in conversation with the student, the paper was being written on a cell phone because the student was a single parent who worked full time and took advantage of every opportunity to complete homework when she could. The one piece of technology that she had with her was her cell phone. Turning into problem-solver, Amy helped the student find an alternative to this method. Her narrative, "Teaching as Practice: A Mobile Phone Points the Way," details how the author recognized she used multiple social work skills while teaching. She was able to see how important it was to students to see her both as a role model for a professional social worker and for a successful educator.

In a very visual narrative, visiting a floating city in Cambodia brought the struggles in poverty of its residents and the incredible positivity and strength they embodied to life. In their article, "Contextualizing Practice in Cambodia: A Hidden Living Place with Practice Insight," Monit Cheung and Michelle Srader demonstrate clearly the need to put aside middle class lenses and view the environment and people from a strengths perspective. Amidst the unique sounds, sights, smells, and tastes of the floating city's boats are people with a sense of pride and a culture they cherish. Instead of allowing themselves to be disadvantaged because of the enormous poverty in which they live, residents of this floating city have used the power of their culture to sustain them. In

this fish-rich area which could easily be known only for fishing, floating boats sell food and beverages, as well as other goods and services. An entire web of commerce has been developed, and in the truest meaning of interdependence, each boat is dependent on other boats for its survival and growth. Cheung and Srader carefully narrate the importance of context in understanding the intricacies of this city. Recommending immersion experiences as important to attaining cultural competence, the authors communicate clearly the idea that just a tour through this city would not be enough. One must experience it in order to understand it. This acts a reminder that we must strive to put the person in the environment in which they live, being mindful of the strengths and challenges therein.

The process of teaching and learning is a two-way street. We learn from our students as they learn from us. In order to maximize this opportunity, we look for holistic ways to engage, inform, and nurture them and us.

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